

Photographer’s Preface

“Then it seemed to me the Sierra should be called not the Nevada, or Snowy Range, but the Range of Light. And after ten years spent in the heart of it, rejoicing and wandering, bathing in its glorious floods of light, seeing the sunbursts of morning among the icy peaks, the noontday radiance on the trees and rocks and snow, the flush of the alpenglow, and a thousand dashing waterfalls with their marvelous abundance of irised spray, it still seems to me above all others the Range of Light, the most divinely beautiful of all the mountain-chains I have ever seen.” — John Muir

When John Muir coined the phrase Range of Light in the late 1800’s, few people had seen images of the spectacular Sierra Nevada. John Muir’s writings provided the world a window into this magnificent landscape. His writing and activism helped bring attention to the threats to the natural ecosystem of the Sierra Nevada, which in his time were primarily from resource extraction, livestock overgrazing, and human encroachment. Due to the visionary actions of an earlier generation, many regions of the Sierra Nevada are now protected in National Parks and Wilderness Areas. The images of landscape photographer Ansel Adams also played an important role in the protection of important regions of the Sierra, including the majestic Kings Canyon National Park. He worked tirelessly with the Sierra Club, founded by John Muir, to help our nation appreciate and protect the wonderful natural heritage of the Sierra.

Photographers still gain inspiration and imagery from the beautiful landscapes of the Sierra Nevada, protected for the current generation by the far-sighted pioneers of the conservation movement. In our present era, one of the main threats to the Sierra is from global climate change. Even though pressures still exist from resource extraction, pollution, and urban development, today’s science clearly demonstrates that adverse effects to the mountain ecosystems and landscapes are intensifying from the warming climate.

The Changing Range of Light is a photo essay that highlights the transformations occurring in the Sierra as a result of global climate change. Although the photographs I include are not “scientific” analyses of the landscape, they do represent unique moments in time; a view into the marvelous geographies of the Sierra landscape that our generation is privileged to witness. One hundred or even fifty years from now many of the places shown in this volume may be drastically altered. As a landscape photographer living and working primarily in the Sierra region, I feel compelled to share how the landscapes I know are being transformed by global heating. Fortunately some government agencies, scientific organizations, and environmental groups are beginning to address the issue and raise public awareness about ways to combat the problem and adapt to a warming climate. Sierra-based organizations such as the Sierra Nevada Alliance (www.SierraNevadaAlliance.org) and the Sierra Business Council (www.SierraBusinessCouncil.org) are strong leaders in the movement to address climate change in the Sierra Nevada.

I enjoy photographing landscapes that appear untouched and pristine; however it can be difficult to convey through these photographs the complexity of the ecosystems which exist within the scenery. Landscapes are not just the visible entities we see, but also the community of living things present in the habitat: the trees, the birds, the mammals (including humans), the insects, and the microbes. The landscape also includes many soundscapes, along with invisible components and silent presences and processes. The landscape is never still; and what we see is filled vibrantly with what

we cannot see - atoms, geological movements, winds, seasons, sap, microbes, thoughts of animals, rotation of leaves. Places are alive with movement and complexity. The characteristic interplay of biological and physical forces within a place is its identity - its soul, its personality, its essence. I strive in my work to capture this expression of a place, to communicate a fleeting gesture of the landscape that is forever changing.

What is not so visible in my images are the subtle changes that are occurring to these landscapes, year after year, as we humans heat the planet. The main crisis the Sierra range now faces is the unnatural change wrought on these places by human-induced global warming. The effects of global climate change sometimes appear to be happening only in a far away place, at the ends of the world on continents we may never experience. Melting icecaps and receding glaciers seem a world away from where we live and recreate. While these areas may be experiencing the most obvious signs of a planet under stress, the changes are also happening in areas with which we are more familiar, and that we experience on a much more personal level.

Through this photo-essay of Sierra landscapes paired with narration by prominent scientists, I hope to give readers a glimpse of what is at stake as climate change affects our cherished corner of the world. I hope these images will inspire action to counteract these threats so that future generations can enjoy the Sierra Nevada we know, and the animals and plants that rely on these landscapes for survival will be spared extinction. One fact is certain - if we do not join together as a civilization to address this problem, the beauty and biodiversity of the “Range of Light” could be forever dimmed. I hope future generations will be able to personally experience the landscapes pictured herein, and not just view them nostalgically in photographs.

As a way to bridge the gap between the stark reality of science and the uplifting inspiration of art, I have interspersed the data on climate change with a selection of poems, both to nourish the heart and to provide readers another portal into the beauty that surrounds us. If we take to heart the words of John Muir, I feel there is cause for some hope in the face of the bleak scientific data: “The wrongs done to trees, wrongs of every sort, are done in the darkness of ignorance and unbelief, for when the light comes, the heart of the people is always right.”

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